

5th March 98

Masud Touleps
Flat 201
Karakoram
Saidabad
Hyderabad
500059

Dear friend,

I am extremely sorry,

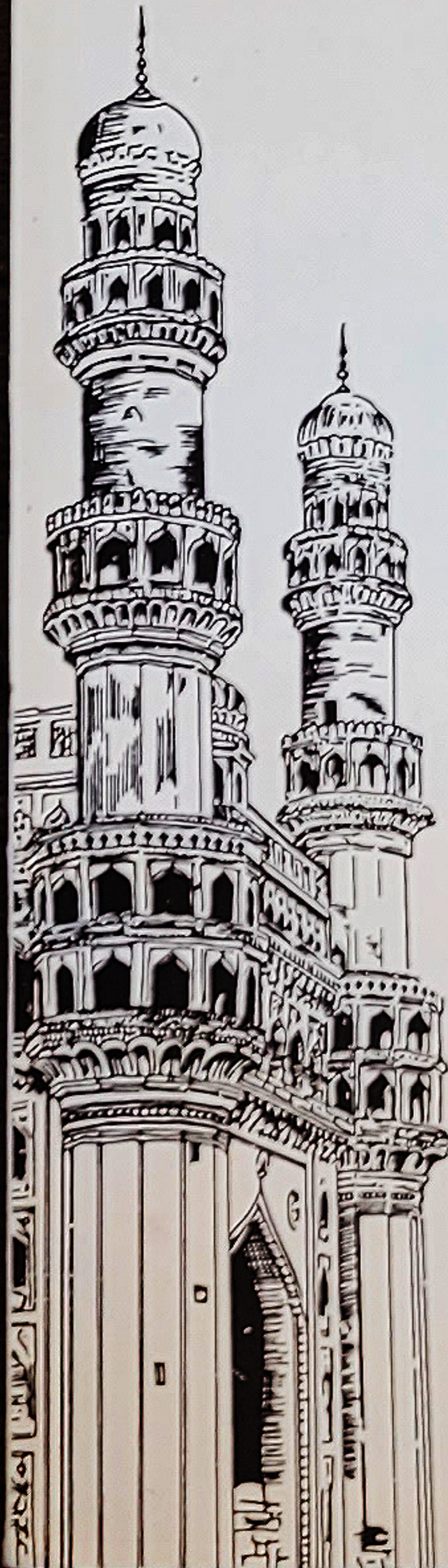
could not send my review earlier. There has been so much confusion
here. Prof. Saifuddin has resigned and another gentleman
has taken charge. Hence the delay. I regret to hear of you
and your wife's illness. Our affection and appreciation of
the hidden and subtle dimension of Islamic knowledge
deeply. My health is not good and my travels have suffered.
Anyhow I try to read & write.

Yours
S. Saifuddin



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I N D I A

VISION OF ISLAM*
(Review Article)

S. VAHIDUDDIN

THERE has been no dearth of books on Islam in the recent past, and one need not look far for the reasons. The political landscape of the world has changed dramatically since the Second World War, and many states with predominantly Muslim populations have declared independence from foreign influence or rule. Even though (in spite of their numerical strength and strategical importance) Muslim countries have to defer to the agendas of big powers, and more often than not present a sad spectacle of a divided house, the common religious affiliation that they have has forced the world to take an interest in their religion, and to explore further their stereotypes of the Muslims. The studies which are considered sympathetic and unbiased in their portrayal of Islam and the Prophet often betray a condescension which has sometimes been counter-productive. Despite their authors' scholarly pretensions and sophisticated jargon, the reader is tempted to recall the words of the great German satirist, Lichtenberg, "if a monkey looks in a mirror, he cannot expect to see a saint looking out at him." The trap these writers fall into is in seeing in great historical figures and the world-shaking religious seers of a bygone age a reflection conditioned by our own cramped conceptions and misconceptions, an image that has been formed partly of ourselves.

Now, we have before us a comprehensive presentation of Islam, jointly prepared by two scholars, one a Japanese and the other an American. Sachiko Murata made what was perhaps the first ever study of gender relations in Islam (*The Tao of Islam*, 1992), while her American husband, Professor William C. Chittick, established his credentials with his penetrating studies of Ibn 'Arabī and Rūmī. The writers try to find access to Islam through its own traditions, and not through the subtly

* Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (Paragon House: New York, 1994), 367 pp.

tinted spectacles of the West. "Instead [they wish] . . . to portray Islam from the perspective of those great Muslims of the past who established the major modes of Koranic interpretation and Islamic understanding." How much their approach to Islam is distinguished from the parallel studies undertaken by other eminent scholars from the West can be seen from many of the observations to be found in the book. After pointing out that, even after years of patient study, the Western scholar may remain unappreciative of the revealed text, they write: "However there is enough evidence provided by Islamic civilisation itself and the great philosophers, theologians and poets who have commented on the text to be sure that the problem lies on the side of the reader, not the book. The text is undoubtedly one of the most extraordinary ever put down on paper. Precisely because it is extraordinary, it does not follow people's expectations as to what a book should be." (from the Introduction)

Taking as their basis the *Hadīth* of Gabriel as reported in an authentic tradition, the writers consider Islam as a three dimensional reality whose constituents are *Islām*, *Īmān* and *Ihsān*. The first deals with activities such as bearing witness, praying and fasting, the second with motivation, and the third with doing what is beautiful - as the writers translate *Ihsān*, equating beautiful with good. Lastly, but significantly, a fourth dimension is added which they refer to as "time and history." Islam has a definite view of history, how it unfolds itself in time, and how history and time come to an end. It is small wonder, in this sense, that Islam looks on history not as sound and fury signifying very little, but informed with divine intentions.

We find almost all the major themes of the Qur'ān discussed in such a way as to be intelligible to non-Muslims as well as to those Muslims who have grown distant or become alienated from their roots. A discussion of the well-known Pillars of Islam is followed by a thoughtful elucidation of the Qur'ānic understanding of the signs (*āyāt*) of God. Man is asked to reflect on His signs which abound in nature, in historical events, and not least in his own self. It was in full conformity with the

Qur'ānic vision that the great poet Sa'dī saw in every leaf of a tree a rich repository of divine gnosis. However, a proper cognisance of the *signs* requires prophetic guidance. The Qur'ān is so rich in content that any discussion cannot go beyond preliminaries. They feel that the best way to find access to the Qur'ānic vision of God is to see how He is named. His *al-Asmā' al-Husnā*, the Beautiful Names, give us a clue to God, the really *Real* in His manifest aspect.

The writers point out, as had been observed by Muslim scholars earlier, that, though God in His essence is unlike any other thing, He is named with attributes which have an analogical relation to the human world. But, even in their similarity, they transcend human limitations. His Mercy transcends human mercy and His Justice outstrips the concept as known to mortals. Often, these attributes are categorised in terms of *Jamāl* (Beauty) and *Jalāl* (Majesty). Our writers, however, consider them in the framework of *tashbīh* and *tanzīh*, of *similarity* and *remoteness*. Another remarkable feature of these Names is that they offer a conflicting profile. He brings to life (*Muḥyi*) as well as causes death. He is Forgiving as well as Chastiser. While in some names the element of *tanzīh* is dominant; in others it is the element of *tashbīh*. The writers make a point when they say that the two formulas commonly in use among Muslims, *Subḥān-Allāh* and *al-ḥamd li-Allāh*, describe respectively *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*. On a nominal level He is beyond all that is ascribed to Him, and on the phenomenal level praise is due to Him and to Him alone, a formula which is often repeated in the Qur'an. As the writers are fully aware, *tashbīh* and *tanzīh* are the two complementary aspects of *tawḥīd*, Divine unity, the central theme of the Qur'ān.

No reader of the Qur'ān can fail to be struck by the emphasis that is laid on the *ghaib*, or unseen, the indispensable constituent of Muslim faith. The writers take care to show that, in the Qur'ānic perspective, the unseen does not in any way mean what cannot reach the eyes, but what is invisible in principle, and what transcends the senses as such, both with reference to the material world and with reference to the non-

material, the unseen and the insensible *per se*. Hence the heavens that the Qur'ān refers to are not the spheres of the planetary or any galactic system, but transcend all empirical conditions.

We know that in many religions light has assumed a specific significance, and the use of light (*nūr*), as it appears in the Qur'ān, needs to be carefully attended to lest confusion follow. On page 90 the authors make the distinction between physical light and that which angels are said to be created from. "Physical light is lifeless, while angelic light is alive. Physical light illuminates, but angelic light also enlightens."

Western scholarship has often imputed fatalism to Islam in spite of the categorical Qur'ānic declaration to the contrary: "A human being can only have what he has striven for, and his striving will be seen" (Q, LIII: 39-40). It is therefore all the more welcome to see the balanced and refreshing assessment of the writers on this vexed question of freedom. Freedom and compulsion are the two poles between which human life oscillates. Man is both a servant and a vicegerent, and the dual role which is assigned to man speaks of his ambiguous position. As the writers justly observe, "Freedom is a reality and it is reality that has degrees. The closer people move to God they are free" (p. 116). Man's freedom is conditioned by his proximity to God. Man is both a servant and a vicegerent, but without first becoming a servant he cannot become vicegerent. The Muslim view, as the writers underscore it, is that "The highest degree of vice-gerency" belongs to the most perfect servants and as a result "Muhammad is looked upon as the most perfect human being, the most exalted vice-gerent, and the greatest servant." (p. 127)

Recognising the central role of prophecy in Islamic thinking, Murata and Chittick devote considerable attention to show what this means. And this is not possible unless we know what it is to be a human being according to an Islamic understanding. This inevitably takes us to the highly suggestive Qur'anic account of the trust (*amānah*) that was offered to the heavens and the earth and its mountains but without being

accepted by any sane man who was blissfully ignorant of the risks to which he was to be exposed. God chides him, though rather lovingly, for his folly. The covenant (*mīthāq*), which man made with God in his pre-existential reality, may be understood according to one's own level of understanding. It shows the responsibility that devolves on man to be true to himself.

It is interesting to see how the writers understand the role of Iblis or Satan in the Qur'ānic perspective. Their understanding is based on the dialogue that the Qur'an presents between God and Iblis. They write: "In reading the Christian accounts of Satan, one often gets the impression that Satan is out of control. He has rebelled and set up an empire of his own, where God's laws are not followed." On the contrary, in Islam a different and more subservient role is assigned to him. They say: "Islam is too infused with the idea of *tawhīd* to allow Iblis any sort of independent role. Even Iblis is a Muslim, though only in the broadest sense of the term. He is a compulsory servant of God, not a voluntary servant. His pride and arrogance, his conviction that 'I am better than he,' do not allow him to see that he is doing God's work just like every one else" (p. 141). What are then the vices which alienate man from God? Heedlessness (*ghaflah*) and forgetfulness being at the root, and thus it is in *dhikr* (remembrance) that we find the principal remedy to cure man of this malaise. The function of the messengers of God is just to awaken man from oblivion. Whilst forgetfulness distances man from God, *dhikr* brings him back to His fold. "Remember Me, [God says] I will remember you" (Q, II: 152).

What the Prophet means to Muslims is underlined unambiguously, "If the Koran is Islam, Muhammad is Islam humanly embodied. Devotion to the God who reveals himself through the Koran demands devotion to the perfect embodiment of God's recitation" (p. 184). Small wonder if, with their recognition of the pivotal role of the Prophet, the writers justly wonder why "Muslims of a certain modern persuasion commonly called fundamentalists" play down the role of the Prophet in the name of *tawhīd*. The Qur'ān indeed asks the

Prophet to say: "I am but a mortal like you; it has been revealed to me that your God is one God" (Q, XLI : 6) (p. 185); but it is no less important to know that he is also unlike any other human being. God has chosen him as a mercy to the whole world; he is the recipient of the revelation, a light-giving lamp.

Even the cursory reader of the Qur'an knows the all-pervasive role of God's mercy in its scheme of things. The *sūrah*s of the Qur'an begin with the mention of God as All-Gracious and All-Merciful. His mercy embraces all things, says the Qur'an; His mercy precedes his wrath, says the *Hadīth*. What our writers say in this regard is worth considering. "Mercy pertains to all creatures, whereas wrath pertains to some creatures in some circumstances" (p. 234). Their careful study of the Qur'an and the *Hadīth* also lead them to observations quite uncharacteristic of Western scholarship. They write: "Once a person becomes familiar with the styles of the Koran and the Hadith, it is impossible to mistake one for the other. The Prophet speaks with authority, but with humility and deference as well." (p. 241)

Our authors also discuss the movements that emerged as a consequence of inter-cultural confrontation. The work of Greek philosophers was introduced into the intellectual life of the *Ummah* through translations, notably of Aristotle (rather than Plato), who moulded the categorical framework of Muslim thinking. Amongst Muslim thinkers, they mention al-Fārābī, known as the commentator *par excellence*; Ibn Sīnā whose influence extended beyond philosophy to the world of medicine; but forget Ibn Khaldūn who subjected history for the first time to a sociological treatment, and through whom *kalām* (rational theology) arose to defend the Muslim creed against criticisms emanating from sources inimical to Islam.

Rational theology and philosophical speculation, however, do not exhaust the ways of approaching Islam. The Sufi approach, which is as different from Qur'anic exegesis as it is from philosophical speculation, does not pass unnoticed by Murata and Chittick, who do not fail to observe that the

different dimensions of the Islamic perspective do not exist isolated from one another, but coalesce, sometimes so intimately that the same person may stand as pre-eminent in one sphere as in the other. Al-Ghazzālī's is a typical example. Though an Ash'arite in *kalām*, "his primary concern was to bring out the inner perfections that needed to be developed if people were able to live up to the Sunna" (p. 246). The Sufis stressed a form of knowledge which they called *kashf* (unveiling) which is unique in itself. The kind of knowledge that they had in mind is unmediated by rational reasoning, and access to it is possible through sincere commitment to the *Sunnah* and to an adherence to the example of the Prophet.

Ihsān was defined by the Prophet as the ability "to worship God as if you see Him, because, even if you do not see Him, He sees you" (p. 276). Uninterrupted awareness and fear of God (*taqwā*) is possible only if there is no discrepancy between thought and action, and this is what is meant by *ikhlas*. *Ikhlas*, as a quality, is basic to Islamic piety, and *nifāq*, which is its negation, leads to perdition in no uncertain manner. It is justly observed that the English word "sincerity" (a usual translation of *ikhlas*) is now so much abused as to be reduced to formal courtesy. *Ikhlas*, in the Qur'anic context, highlights the conformity of outward action with inward attitude and intention on one level, and at the same time intimates a transcendental dimension on another. The *sūrah* called "*Ikhlas*" presents, above all, God in absolute *tanzīh*: it is God through remoteness or incomprehensibility. It is *tawhīd* in all its purity.

Love, or *agape*, as a dimension in Christian piety is a central theme of the Christian perspective, and Christians may sometimes feel it to be missing in Islam. As a result, they tend to ascribe to extraneous influences the dominant place that it has occupied in the Sufi world view. The word that is used in the Qur'an is *ḥubb* (love), and, in the Qur'anic context, God's love is directed to human beings and to nothing else. But man strays and finds himself easily attached to this hasty world and its fleeting pleasures, forgetting his ultimate concern. It is necessary, here, to remind one's self that the love the Qur'an

speaks of is not the one-sided love of God which Spinoza hails, *amor intellectualis dei*, but a giving and receiving. The Prophet is enjoined to say to those who listen, "If you love God, follow me and God will love you" (Q, III : 31). And God warns them that, if they turn their back on their religion, they will be replaced by another people "whom He loves and who will love Him." (Q, V: 54)

Any description of the personal dimension of Islam cannot fail to see the significance of *du'ā* and *munājāt* (spoken prayers) in the Muslim's path to God. Their recitation goes back to the practice of the Prophet, his descendants and the eminent saints. God showed the way when He promised His response to the suppliant, "Call Me and I will answer you." Some of the most moving supplications have been attributed to the great-grandson of the Prophet, Zain al-'Ābidīn. Much later in time, Khwājah 'Abd-Allāh Anṣārī's *Munājāt* gives the most poignant expression to the stirrings of a soul through poetic imagery.

Ultimately, one is led to questions which have an intimate bearing on human destiny. To be human means to be both spirit and body. The writers lay emphasis on the fact that, unlike certain currents in Christianity, Islam considers human beings as embodied spirits, and this is as valid in this lower earth as it is in the higher world beyond the grave. We can therefore understand why the question of the bodily resurrection has played such a great role in Islam. It is to be noted that the idea of the bodily resurrection did not find favour with the philosophers, and that they were inclined to think that resurrection was a purely spiritual phenomenon. Murata and Chittick feel that, apart from its place as a dogma in Islam, this is the only possible way to see human beings in their empirical reality and their transcendental rôle. They write: "God alone has no embodiment as this or that; human beings are embodied forever" (p. 317). This is not the physical body with which we are familiar, but the body which corresponds to our posthumous plane of existence. Set against the penchant of the modern Muslim intellectuals to sideline the essence of Qur'ānic practice, it is worth seriously considering the degree to which the writers,

each belonging to a different cultural milieu, emphasise the importance of these basic elements of the religion.

The concluding chapters are devoted to the Islamic vision of history. The past is not dead and gone, but signals warnings to be heeded. Needless to say, we are not confronted with a materialistic interpretation of history, but with a teleologic understanding. Historical events are imbued with meaning and quickened with divine intentions. History has an end, though none but God knows the Hour. One of the signs of the impending Hour will be the complete reversal of the human order, especially in terms of morality and societal norms. The vision of Islam that our writers have projected is the harmonious blending of its three main constituents: *Islām*, *Īmān* and *Ihsān*. Small wonder if they have no love lost for the kind of progress which "modern" Muslims aspire to. Progress for them is little more than the frenzied accumulation of power through technology which, ultimately, will threaten the very existence of humankind by the invention of more and more sophisticated weapons of hitherto unimagined destructive force.

Historically, the philosophic and scientific activity of Muslims, according to Murata and Chittick, reached its peak in the heyday of the Baghdad caliphate, and this creativity lost its élan with the changing tides of history. But what Islam really aimed at was human perfection through the blending of its main constituents, and this, the writers argue, was realised only at the time of the Prophet and, presumably, in the time of his immediate successors. The political fortunes of the Muslims took an upward swing with the Abbasids and the Umayyads, but at the expense of moral integrity. The writers bemoan the fact that the reforms pursued later were not undertaken in the spirit of Qur'ānic vision, but rather in the shape and with "the form of the gods of progress and democracy as revealed to the modern West" (p. 333). "In a healthy Islamic society people will . . . devote themselves to the Islamic sciences and art, and undertake the rigors of the spiritual life to the extent of their individual gifts. If such a society has ever fully existed it was at the time of the Prophet; since then, most societies in the Islamic world have

participated in this ideal to some degree, at least until very recent times." (p. 333)

What strikes our writers most in their brief examination of history is the loss of a sense of beauty which is sadly obvious in the comparison between traditional urban life and the monstrosities of the contemporary age. Peace and harmony, which Islam cherished and kept alive for centuries, are lost in the noise and tumult of our "mass media" existence.

A note of caution is needed before this well thought-out and highly empathetic account of Islam is truly appreciated. The translation of some of the key Qur'ānic words may appear unfamiliar, and a stray observation may perhaps not be to one's liking. It must never be forgotten that the translation of Qur'ānic vocabulary will always remain problematic, and of this difficulty our writers are aware. Discerning translators of the Qur'ān have presented their versions as interpretation, and not as translation in its customary understanding. There is no need to say that even the translation of the word *dīn* as *religion* hardly brings to light its changing connotation in the varied contexts of the Qur'ān: recompense, obedience, reckoning, law, worship, faith, nation etc.

To conclude, the writers have convincingly shown that Muslims cannot become what they should be by aping others, but by becoming *sālih* or striving towards integrity in the true Islamic sense, by imbibing Islam in all its dimensions. It is a source of great pleasure to see that, at a time when Islam and its Prophet have become the target of pseudo-intellectualism, a counter movement has been initiated by scholars to whose affection and friendship this reviewer is greatly beholden.

BOOK REVIEWS

MUHAMMAD IFZAL-UR-RAHMAN

ROHIL KHAND TERRITORY (KATEHAR) IN MEDIAEVAL INDIA, 1200 - 1707 A.D.,

Kanishka Publishers, Delhi, 1995; 250 pp.

The work under review consists of ten chapters (the last one being a résumé), seven appendices and a bibliography. It is a micro study of the areas adjacent to Delhi, the principal metropolis of the Delhi Sultanate and, subsequently, the Mughal Empire. Being a fertile region, watered by the Ganges and Jamuna, and having sufficient rainfall, Katehar formed the economic heartland of various empires during the mediaeval period. The different chapters of the book present a description and details of various aspects of life, social conditions, administrative structures, demographic changes which took place in the region's towns in the aftermath of the Muslim conquest at the end of the twelfth century A.D., processes of urbanisation, and socio-economic growth etc. until Awrangzeb's death in 1707. Each chapter is based on contemporary Persian sources available in print and manuscript form and, no doubt, the book contains carefully

analysed information culled from these sources. Such works are welcome in that they add to the easily available historical resources for scholars of multi-lingual and multi-religious societies like those of India.

However, in certain cases, the author has failed to escape certain pitfalls. His statement about the importance of *Wāqī'āt-i-Mushtāqī* as a source of information is contradictory. First he expresses his doubt about its author's credibility, then he describes it as "a significant work for providing insights into the life and conduct of the nobles who served in Katehar during the Lodi period" (p.17). In fact, the *Wāqī'āt-i-Mushtāqī* is the only contemporary work containing historical information on Afghan rule under the Lodi Sultans, Sher Shāh Sūr and his successors. Objections may also be raised to the incorrect transliteration of Persian terms and family or tribal surnames of historical figures. A scholar

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For further information, please contact:
Dr. Munawar A. Anees, Editor-in-Chief, *Periodica Islamica*
31 Jalan Riong, Kuala Lumpur-59100, Malaysia
Tel (+60-3)282-5286 • Fax (+60-3)282-8489
eMail: America Online: *dranees* • CompuServe: *dranees*
Delphi: *drmanees* • InterNet: *dranees@kicyber.pc.my*
URL: <http://www.ummah.org.uk/dranees/periodica/>

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